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A Consideration of Dialogue between Philosophy and Psychology: What Psychology Should Reconsider for a More Fruitful Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

The possibility of dialogue between philosophy and psychology will be considered in this essay based on my experience during a stay at the philosophy section of the Institute of Education (IoE). Before beginning this discussion, I will briefly recount some details of my stay at the IoE. From April 1st to September 16th in 2009, I was on sabbatical and during this time Professor Paul Standish kindly let me stay at the IoE. As I was searching for a place to conduct my sabbatical, Kyoto University happened to hold a joint colloquium with the philosophy section of the IoE, so at that time I asked Prof. Standish to accept my application as a visiting academic. I am a developmental psychologist, however I did not hope to spend my sabbatical in the psychology section, as I wanted to study about education from a different viewpoint.

As I had only a modest knowledge of philosophy, I decided to participate in as many seminars and lectures as possible during my stay in London. I found all of the discussions I attended to be very interesting. However, I also became aware of difficulties in developing a dialogue between philosophy and psychology.

PROBLEMS OF PRESENT PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH TRENDS: WHY IS A DIALOGUE DIFFICULT?

I believe that a dialogue between philosophy and psychology is possible. To be more precise, I do not want to think it impossible. However, I have to say that it may now be difficult. I cannot confidently argue on questions of philosophy, because I am a novice in this field and do not have well developed views concerning how philosophy should be. I can, however, argue how we as psychologists should reconsider our own researches and studies that we conduct.

Some tendencies of psychological research seem to be obstacles of the dialogue I seek. Present psychological researches are divided into so many small sections that we tend to fail to see the whole picture of human cognition or human development.¹ Moreover, psychological researches are often discussed only in the context of psychological research. This context of psychological research is often far from the actual context of human development and education. In fact, the reason I avoided going to psychology section was that I felt conducting my sabbatical solely in the psychology section would not be beneficial for my present position as a researcher in the Center for Higher Education Studies.

My impression of criticisms directed to psychology from philosophy during my stay in UK was that while they raised valid points, they were often based on a misunderstanding of psychology. These criticisms seemed to be reasonable because they pointed out weak points in the psychological approach. As psychological research adopts an empirical method, each bit of psychological research can analyze only a small part of the human mind; this is an unavoidable phenomena. The problem is that many psychologists seem to fail to put each piece of research into the whole picture of human cognition and human development and fail to consider the value and meaning of the target phenomena of our research in the greater context of human life. For example, although much research on developmental psychology shows interesting developmental changes in children's cognitive abilities, many researchers involved in these studies do not seem to be able to present a large scale and well-considered picture of how children actually grow up and participate in this world. Most of the criticisms coming from philosophy are directed to issues such as this, so as I stated above, I believe they are reasonable.

However, it must be noted that not all psychological research is either myopic or superficial. The accumulation of various types of psychological research might have the capability to show the whole picture of human cognition and human development. This is the reason I wrote above that the criticisms of psychology were based on misunderstandings. The fatal problem is that, although we as psychologists have the responsibility to solve these misunderstandings, we have not succeeded in doing this. As a result, creating dialogues between philosophy and psychology has been difficult.

IS IT ESSENTIAL FOR PSYCHOLOGY TO HAVE A DIALOGUE WITH PHILOSOPHY?

In order to have more constructive discussions between the fields of philosophy and psychology, psychologists have to reconsider their own research and show a comprehensive and thoughtful picture of human cognition and development. However, I should confirm here why I believe psychology should reconsider the nature of its research and have a dialogue with philosophy. The reason that psychology should try to have a dialogue with philosophy is that such discussion might assist in educational psychology by deepening the understanding of education and human development and forcing us as psychologists to reconsider much of what we have taken for granted. There is a mutual relationship in this type of reconsideration and dialogues with other academic disciplines. The former enables the latter, and the latter promotes the former.

Here I will give three reasons why I believe this type of reconsideration is necessary for psychology. Firstly, education is too vast and complex an activity to fully understand simply through psychological methods. I used to go to an elementary school weekly to conduct observations when I was a doctoral student. For me, this was a profound experience. I realized that education in practice is much more thought provoking than psychological research, and that educational psychologists could learn a great deal from educational practices. By this, I do not mean that we should abolish our research methods, nor do I mean that psychological research is useless. I mean that we should reconsider the possibilities and future perspectives of our research from wider viewpoints. We should be aware of what is possible and what is impossible using the methods employed by psychology. We should not ignore the elements of education that are impossible, using our methods, for us to research

directly. Because education is an art that cannot function without these elements, ignoring such things is irresponsible.

Secondly, the development of subjects or participants in education, such as children, students and teachers, also contains more complicated and elaborate aspects than psychological methods can fully grasp. In order to understand human development and consider this development in the context of education, analyzing some developmental changes of cognitive ability, which is often the focus of psychological research, is not enough. We also have to consider the value and meaning of these abilities from the perspectives of the subjects who live and grow up in this world.

For example, when psychologists study the academic writing of university students, we focus on the students' cognitive processes and motivation toward writing. However, we usually treat academic writing as an unconditional necessary competence in university learning, and fail to analyze the significance of academic writing for our students. As far as we cannot answer the question of what benefits there are for students when they write academically, it might be impossible to develop more helpful writing education.

Here is another example. Some students in my class made comments on the educational practice known as cognitive counseling, which has been developed based on cognitive psychological studies. Cognitive counseling is a well-known activity in Japan that helps students who feel they have difficulty in school learning to acquire more appropriate learning strategies. The students' comments, which I show below, imply that the consideration of the meaning of each cognitive competence for students themselves is essential.

'I do not think that I would have gone to see a cognitive counselor, if our high school had had a cognitive counselor, because I do not care about my non-favorite subject. I can show good performance in my favorite subject without help'.

'When I was said what is a good strategy, whether it is said directly or indirectly, I would adopt different way of learning'.

These comments imply that, although much educational psychological research has clearly shown the effects of cognitive counseling, the results of these studies do not cover the full spectrum of the students' learning. Here we could also say that we should know what we can know and what we cannot know from psychological research, and that in order to understand human development thoroughly, we cannot ignore the parts of human development that exist out of our direct research focus.

Thirdly, today psychology faces a dangerous situation. Society and policy makers stress the importance of quality assurance and research based on evidence. They have high expectations for psychologists, who have long experience conducting empirical research. I myself was indirectly tapped to join a project to make a measurement of generic skills of university students. These expectations of psychology might seem to be favorable for psychologists, but actually they pose great danger to our profession.

Evidence based decision making and quality assurance itself is important to some extent, but empirical data is not almighty. I believe all psychologists are very well aware of this. We have to be very cautions that we do not become trapped into trends and movements that may be inappropriate or actually harmful for human development and education. We cannot be too careful because uncritical worship of the power of evidence seems to be stronger today than in any other period. In order to be careful,

those in our field should reconsider what we are doing and the influence of what we do.

WHAT DOES PSYCHOLOGY CONTRIBUTE TO THE DIALOGUE?

Continuous dialogue needs mutual contribution. Although I have written above why the dialogue is helpful and necessary for psychology, I am not able to outline the many things that psychology could do for philosophy. I do not feel confident enough in my thoughts on the state of philosophy and I am not sure of the needs of the field, therefore I do not feel that I have the ability to offer these types of opinions.

However, I can say that psychological research based on surveys and observations of the actual life and behavior of subjects who participate in education might be helpful for philosophy. Actually there have been psychologists who established grand theories related to human cognition and human development, and their works have been studied not only in the field of psychology but also in philosophy. Features of their theories could be said that their explanation and interpretation of human cognition and human development are based on their survey and observation on people. This is an aspect of psychology that could stimulate other academic disciplines.

Moreover, there are many psychologists who have drawn large scale theories based on the analysis of actual surveys, observations and experiences, but who do not have global recognition. I think that one reason for this situation is language. Psychologists usually find they must write a book to describe a significant theory, but it is more difficult to write a book in a second language than to write empirical papers in a second language. Moreover, when we write an empirical paper in a second language, it is not easy to quote a book written in our first language. As a result, there are many psychological works that are not as well known as they probably should be.

After all, psychologists should make efforts on a global scale to make much more use of the products of our research in order to show our understanding and interpretation of human cognition and human development. As we take up this challenge, it would also be necessary for us to reconsider what we can know from our own research. When we can express our own views on human cognition and human development and discuss them with other academic disciplines, including philosophy, the field of psychology will be able to make its own contribution to the dialogue.

CLOSING

I learned many things during my stay at the IoE. I would like to express many thanks to Prof. Standish and everyone I met there. I was able to reconsider my research in both psychology and higher education. Moreover I recognized how Japanese culture has formed my way of thinking as an education researcher. I regret that I cannot say what kind of contribution I made during my stay, because the six months have passed very quickly and all I felt I was able to do was learn from the many people I met.

However, I hope that I am now on the way to making contributions. As I am working in higher education studies, I had felt that psychological study contains both possibilities and dangers before going to London. My encounters in the UK have

made my thoughts clearer. Psychology has possibilities because it studies actual student learning, a strong method to understand students. At the same time, there is the danger that we as psychologists might forget to think about what we are doing critically. I hope that I myself will be able to have better-considered theory of students' development, and have a more fruitful discussion with philosophy in the future.

NOTE

- 1 The word 'development' seems to be avoided in some contexts because it conveys the meaning of developing or growing to the given goal. However, in the context of developmental psychology, 'development' has a more flexible meaning that contains diversity and endlessness. We have a phrase 'life-long development' but do not have the term of 'life-long growth'. Actually developmental psychologists take pride in the word 'development.' So I use the term development in this essay.

